

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JEF-7

47/1 Ngamwongwan Road
Bangkok 9, Thailand
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The Problem of Equality - Continued

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

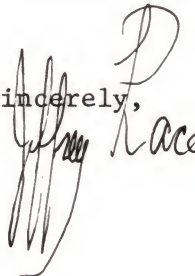
My last collection of thoughts on this subject, in JEF-6, was somewhat abstract, even though it resulted from looking at a number of societies of the distant past. This past month I have spent a good bit of time reading into Thai history, to see how well the ideas of last month fit with actual people and events in the country where I live now. I have found some interesting differences from what I expected, and I'll try to spell them out as I go along in the following pages. One major conclusion of JEF-6, that systems evolve soon after human communities form to transfer surplus from those with less to those with more, holds up very well in Thailand. We can observe a number of changes, too, in this extractive system in Thailand, as the society develops from feudal, to bureaucratic, to modern commercial methods of taking from the poor to support the well-to-do.

It has proved very useful to me to see how this real extractive system worked in the past. During the period which I looked at, the leading members of the society were quite straightforward in stating in whose interests the system was intended to work. Consequently the realities were not obscured by egalitarian rhetoric, as they tend to be in the twentieth century. Though the subject here is past, the attitudes, the structures, and the various control mechanisms which comprised the system of wealth transfers of previous centuries still operate in somewhat modified form in the present time -- a subject which I will get around to in due course. In the meantime I want to share the observations I have come by up to this point.

I have been fortunate in being able to use the very extensive historical collections of the Siam Society here in Bangkok. Writers whose works I have found particularly useful are Akin Rabibhadana, a contemporary anthropologist, H. G. Quaritch Wales, who wrote some forty years ago, and John Bowring, British writer and man-of-affairs who a century ago negotiated the famous treaty which bears his name, which opened Siam to world trade.

At some point, when I have adequate sources, I hope to investigate the structure and working of extractive systems in Vietnam and Indonesia during comparable periods. However, my next step will be to study how transfer mechanisms change their nature when economic diversification comes about. In traditional societies, where the principal economic activity is the production of food, "surplus" has an immediate physical meaning; we can see it actually removed from the hands of those who create it. When economic activity becomes more complex, specialized and interdependent, with a multiplicity of productive processes - agriculture, services, primary products of all types, manufacturing -- the meaning of surplus is much less clear. Moreover the transfers are no longer physical transfers of a distinct product which we can identify as surplus, but take the form of bookkeeping entries. Thus I have found it helpful to discover the mechanism of transfers before these complexities set in. I hope others find this a useful exercise also.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'P. R. Ace', is written over the word 'Sincerely,'. The signature is stylized with a large 'P' and a long horizontal stroke.

The Early Thai System of Wealth Transfers (14th - 16th Centuries)

One of the virtues of ancient Thai society was its openness about whose interests the system was designed to advance. The expression for "reign" was sawoeri rajasombat: an elegant formulation imported from India meaning to enjoy (or eat) the royal property (i.e. the entire territory of the Thai). When the king sent a royal governor to rule an area, he was said to kin muang: to "eat the city." Similarly there was no question why the Thai went to war each dry season: it was to enslave people from the neighboring kingdoms of the Khmer, the Mons and the Burmese, in order to have workers and personal attendants for the Thai nobility. Even Thai "freemen" (phrai) were required to render six months a year service to their master.

Observers seem to agree on the result: that those who labored to produce the food to feed the kingdom received enough to survive until the next harvest, the rulers taking the rest, either on their own behalf or on behalf of the the Buddhist Church. The anthropologist Akin writes thus: "The majority of the people planted rice for their own consumption. What exceeded their needs went to support religion and the governing class of princes and nobles." Wales quotes the French observer La Loubere, writing at the end of the 17th Century, to explain the political passivity of the population: "Being resolved to bear the same Yoke under any Prince whatever -- and having the assurance of not being able to bear a heavier -- they concern themselves not in the Fortune of their Prince: and experience evinces that upon the least trouble they let the Crown go, to whom Force or Policy will give it."

Even so it appears that Thai cultivators were better off in some sense than their European counterparts, for the documents I have been able to locate speak of no peasant revolts until the modern period. This remains to be checked out. Whatever the "intentions" however, this period appears less problematical than the 20th Century, where inequality is an "unintended consequence," to the overcoming of which the best efforts are being devoted. In the traditional Thai system, inequality was clearly intended: in wealth and income, in honor, and in power. So far as I can determine, three elements made the system work as well as it did: a value system, a transfer system, and a control system. We can devote a bit of space to each.

The Value System

It is reasonable to ask whether values, i.e. beliefs about what is proper, have any effect on behavior, i.e. what one actually does. One could argue, for example, that some groups of people behave in a certain way because they are compelled to do so, though they do not believe it is right to do so. (For example, some groups of people might think it wrong to build altars and make sacrifices to a certain deity, but they do so because they have fallen under an invader of a different faith.) This defense against the "independent" influence of beliefs holds for any one group within a larger one, but it falls, from the fallacy of composition, when applied to an entire community. Out of the infinite possibilities of behavior, people perform only some, and rather consistently. What beliefs influence these behaviors I will call the value system; it is true, of course, that some large group, responding to its own values, may compel another to perform acts contrary to its own values.

This is just another way of approaching, at a more general level, the problem I mentioned in JEF-6: that even equality is not intrinsically stable. That is, no structure by itself is stable due to some structural properties; values must make certain kinds of behavior salient, i.e. more likely to be performed by all, so that any one individual, in thinking of all the things he might do, must take into account the likelihood of everyone else doing a certain thing; he orients his actions accord-

ingly. Structures can then be designed to increase the probability of this behavior recurring.

Of course, value systems themselves do not develop randomly. It would be foolish to suppose that values favoring inequality are an accident of nature. As we proceed we will note some examples of how values of this sort are propagated through the operation of the system itself.

Going back to JEF-6 for a moment, we noted two things there which a value system must deal with. First, since neither perfect equality nor any form of inequality is stable of itself, the value system must provide for the "rightness" of inequality, in order for a structure to congeal stably around it. Second, an essential structural element of wealth transfers from poor to rich is autonomous organizations, i.e. ones in which the leaders can resist outside pressures, and the followers obey only their leaders -- not outsiders, and not someone else's leaders. Hence we can infer that the more the value system provides for formal obedience (i.e. regardless of the substance of commands) the better will work the system of wealth transfers.

The first of these value elements was provided in the traditional Thai system by religious doctrines, taken over from Indian Buddhism. The important doctrinal points here seem to be two: that the world consists of a natural hierarchy, and that one's standing in the hierarchy now depends on the balance of merit (bun) and sin (bap) from one's previous lives. As Akin puts it: "The Thai perceive that all living beings stand in a hierarchy of varying ability to make actions effective and of varying degrees of freedom from suffering. . . . Status differentiation was the accepted order of things. Being born into a noble family of wealth or being given a position of high rank was the consequence of bun which the individual had accumulated." Thus the salience of inequality, among all the possibilities which the Thai community might have landed on. The notion of rewards in the next life for good behavior in this one also can be seen to reduce the extent of demands for immediate compensation for performance. Likewise it can perhaps assuage feelings of outrage at the high station of what the believer perceives to be wicked men -- they are receiving their just rewards for an earlier life of probity.

The position of the king, at the peak of the hierarchy, received special doctrinal consideration in traditional Thai belief as well. In Buddhist doctrine the individual who attains the throne is (as evidenced by his ascension) a Bodhisatva, or Buddha-to-be, on his way through a succession of meritorious existences. The Hindu doctrine (prominent in court circles in Thailand for a long period) also legitimized the position of the king at the head of a pyramid of inequality, with the notion of devaraja, or god-king. In Thai animist belief, the figure of the king also had special supernatural powers, and by inference rights as well.

The second element, of compliance, was provided by a number of more secular cultural mechanisms. From birth Thai were taught that all social relationships are in the form of superior-inferior, or phuyai-phunoi. Superiors must be greeted with a gesture of respectful submission, the wai, performed by joining the palms together in front of the face; the higher the rank of the person greeted, the higher the palms and the lower must the greeter dip his head. Persons of very elevated rank were greeted by an even more exaggerated gesture of submission, the krab, performed by making a wai with one's forehead on the ground. (These forms survive today, though now one would krab only an aged relative such as one's grandmother or grandfather, a monk, or the king.)

Language forms confirmed the emphasis on inequality: there was (and is) no way to speak Thai without indicating relative status of speaker and the person addressed. Pronouns range from the equivalent of "your excellency" to "you inferior creature." Even brother and sister address each other by terms indicating relative age (and hence status). (It may be worth noting here, for comparative purposes, that analogous, if somewhat attenuated, forms used to exist in English; my recollection of history is that one strong impetus to dropping them was the usage of egalitarian Protestant sects.)

Of the results of these values, Bowring wrote as follows: "In Siamese society, one is alike struck with the vassalage of the subject many, and the domination of the ruling few. So absolute is submission, that the severest punishments emanating from the authorities are submitted to without murmuring. . . . The groundwork of all Siamese institutions and habits is a reverence for authority. This principle is pushed to forms of the most extravagant excess; on the one side of assumption, and on the other side of prostration. It influences languages so far as to create vocabularies utterly unlike one another, to be employed in various grades of society; it is exhibited in the daily usages of life in shapes the most inconvenient and ridiculous. No man of inferior rank dares to raise his head to the level of that of his superior; no person can cross a bridge if an individual of higher grade chances to be passing below; no mean person may walk upon a floor above that occupied by his betters."

These were not by any means empty forms, for there was an important corollary to the notion of rank: everyone had to comply with the orders of his superiors, regardless of how foolish or damaging in their consequences; inferiors were enjoined from speaking to superiors unless spoken to, and from disagreeing with them in any event, again regardless of consequences. Inferiors were expected not to give advice if not asked. Akin cites a well-known incident where a lower-ranking person violated this rule: "When a building was being put up at Wat Phra Chettuphon, an ordinary royal page warned Phraya Siphiphath, the supervisor of the building, that the rope used for pulling logs was too long, and thus there was a danger of the log swinging and hitting the wall of the building. Phraya Siphiphath sharply cut him down to size by saying 'You are too young and do not know anything. You should not tell phu yai what to do.' The consequence was that much damage was done to the building and a number of workers lost their lives." Phrai suffered penalties if they disobeyed their superiors, and were enjoined with such maxims as "Stand by thy princes until death," "Assist thy chiefs efficiently," and "Towards thy rulers do not mean harm." The penalty for a noble disobeying superiors was to be made a phrai.

The Extractive System

Were the king to journey from the ancient capital of Sukhothai into the hinterlands, making the demands alone and in person which the system as a whole extracted, it is certain he would not have survived the trip past the first village. It is plain, then, that he needed help in transferring the surplus from the producers to himself, and that he had to share some of the surplus with those who helped him take it from the farmers. It is also plain in retrospect, though, that the participants at the bottom thought it "right" in some sense, and also (since they apparently never revolted), "better" in some sense than any other set of arrangements which were open to them. So it would be wrong, at least to their perceptions, to equate the system with simple "theft" at sword-point.

As we saw in JEF-6, the secret to such a successful extractive system is in producing a structure of rules and distribution of technical processes such that the

cultivators willingly exchange their surplus for something else that they need. Through proper design (which the ancient Thai system achieved) the structure of rules and distribution of technical processes can themselves ensure that the cultivators have just enough demands that they are willing to trade their entire surplus to satisfy them.

The easiest way to understand the workings of this extractive structure is to begin with the categories of people defined by the structure, since it is the existence of groups of people with different endowments (of physical product or intangibles) that creates the basis for exchange. The ancient Thai system recognized four categories: the king and the princes; the nobles (nai), the freemen (phrai), and the that (something like Western slaves, but with more legal rights).

Under this system the king had the highest status in the land; he had absolute power of life and death over everyone (and frequently exercised it, especially against his own family); and he was the ultimate owner of all property. The system was "intended" to run on his behalf and on that of his family, except insofar as they in turn used their resources to support religion.

The next group, of nai, were the principal assistants to the royal/princely group in transferring the food surplus and labor from the majority of the population on up to those at the top. They were thus responsible for producing the freemen under their control (see below) in courts of law when called; for producing the freemen for annual corvee (six months a year during this period) and for military service. In their capacity as royal officials they were also responsible for collecting taxes, fees, fines, imposts, duties, confiscations, etc. and passing them (or some portion) on to the royal treasury. For these services they were rewarded in various ways with a share of the exactions from those at the bottom. As we noted above, the king would have to share so as to induce others to collaborate with him in collecting the surplus.

The kinds of "payment" which the nai received were several. For one, they were permitted to have their own that (i.e. people whose entire surplus and free labor were committed by law to their owner). Second, they were given custody of freemen belonging to the king, to use as they saw fit during periods when they were not serving the king, provided only that they did not "oppress" them. Third, they had their own freemen to serve them. Fourth, they were permitted to keep a certain percentage of the taxes in money and kind passing through their hands in their capacity as officials. This percentage ranged from one-tenth (for some kinds of fines) to one-half for the rice-tax, to 100% for other taxes. We can say, roughly, that the nai as a group were permitted to keep half of the physical resources that flowed through their hands. Fifth, the nai were permitted to attend court, that is, they had access to the king himself, and thus to considerable influence. Sixth, they were exempt themselves from taxes and corvee. Seventh, each member of the nobility was assigned a numerical rank (called sakdina) which entitled him both to a certain land area, to workers to operate the land, and to the produce of that land.

The third legally recognized group, of freemen or phrai, consisted of two categories. First were the phrai luang or royal freemen, who had to do six months' corvee each year; these people were however entrusted by the king to members of the nobility during the rest of the year. While the royal freemen were in the king's service they had to provide their own food and clothing. A second category were phrai som, freemen who belonged to individual nobles, had to work for them, and did not have to perform corvee. All freemen had to be registered by a government registrar: it was a crime not to be registered, and any non-registered person would be seized by the first nai who saw him -- he could not claim protection of the law.

The fourth group was that of that, something like a Western slave in that they were considered the personal property of another person, who claimed all their time, energy and physical surplus. However, that could own property, inherit, have families, and enjoy protection of the law: their owner had no power of life or death over them. There were various categories of that depending on how the status was acquired - by birth, by debt, by capture in war. Some categories were redeemable, some not. The that did not have to perform corvee. Exact figures are not available, but one source indicates that about one-third of the population consisted of slaves.

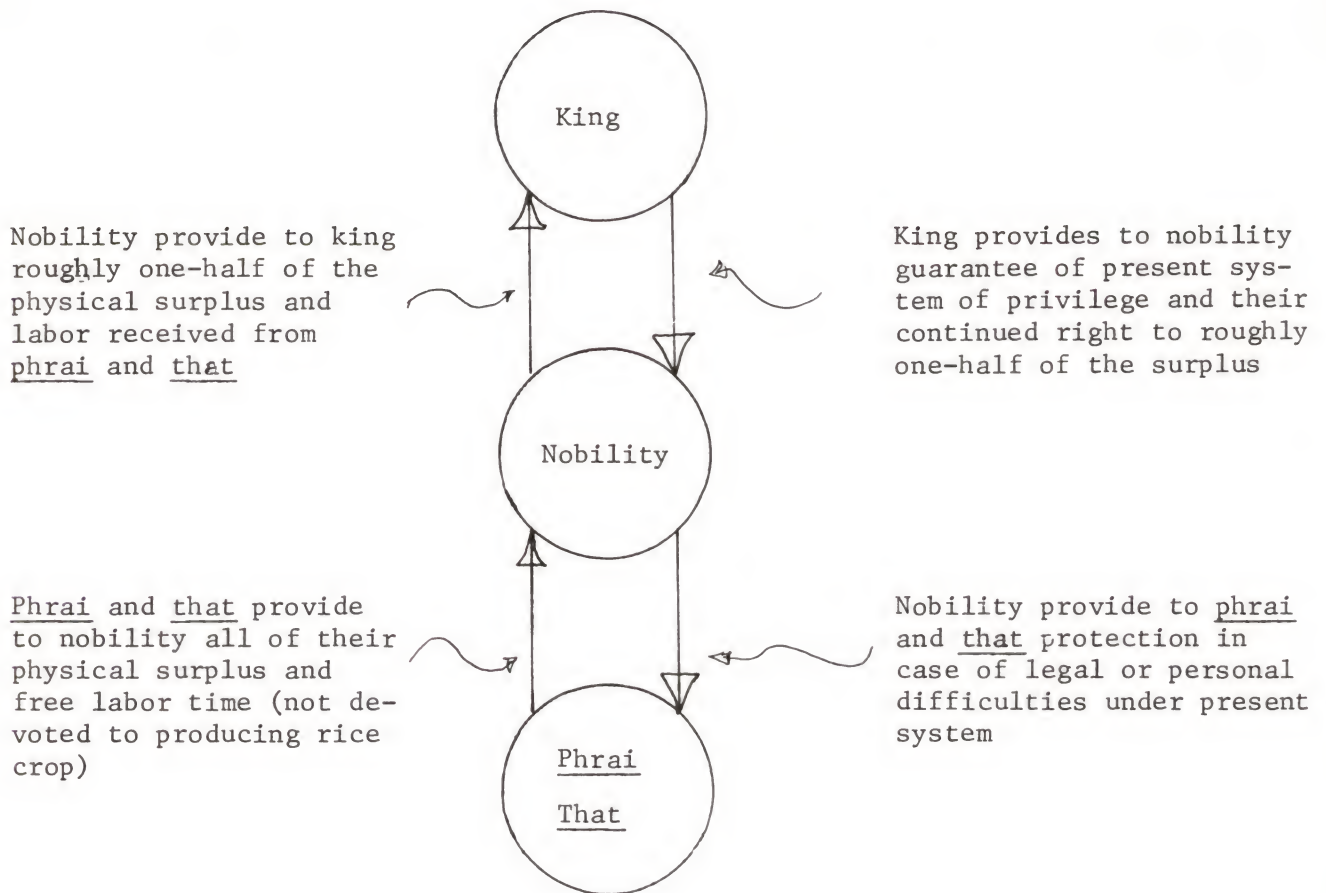
Strictly within this hierarchy, and ignoring for the moment the position of the Buddhist Church, we can analyze the exchanges by which the surplus was transferred up. First, we can group together the phrai and the that and ask what was their relationship to their master, a nai. According to Akin, the nai protected and helped his phrai and that, which he was able to do because of the special powers given to him in the law, for example, attending court, or having legal standing (thus, a phrai could only institute legal proceedings through his nai). If he wished, a nai could also (in violation of the king's law) give a document exempting his phrai from taxes. In Akin's words: "When a phrai wished to institute a legal proceeding, it was the duty of his nai to bring him to the proper court. When the phrai had trouble, he could request help from his nai. If the phrai was sent away in service to the government, and his wife was in difficulty, she should inform his nai to report the matter to the king. In case the nai took the phrai with him on government service, and the phrai was in need of money, a law laid down that the nai should let him borrow money without interest."

In return for these "protective" services provided by the nai the phrai supported the nai as a group. Akin quotes Bishop Pallegoix on this point: "Normally, [phrai] constituted an important source of income for their nai. If the nai did not oppress them, but let them earn their living in peace, they would give large amounts of gifts such as rice, fruits, vegetables and fish." These voluntary donations were of course in addition to the statutory requirements of labor services, taxes and fees, the point being that because the nai as a group had discretion to be more or less helpful, the phrai wanted to be as "helpful" as possible.

We can also analyze what the exchanges were between king and nobility. To the extent that people believed in the special magical or religious powers of the king, the latter had something to exchange with them, i.e. using his special powers on their behalf. Thus in relation to the nobles, the ancient Thai kings considered themselves as protectors of the interests of the nobility, for example by exempting the nobility from taxes and corvee, by decreeing a special law of inheritance, by exempting the homes of high-ranking nobility from searches, by applying special legal protection to the families of the nobility, etc. The king also legitimated the right of the nobility to live luxuriously (like himself) off the surplus produced by the cultivators.

In exchange for these benefits left to the discretion of the king, the nobility as a group gave the king a large share of the physical surplus produced by the cultivators, and they administered the phrai luang on his behalf.

We can diagram this system of exchanges as follows, to make it clearer:



We should note at this point two persistent problems with this structure. First, it required no, or not much, specialized technical competence to perform the job of king -- anyone could do it. Consequently there was continuous struggle at the top to determine who would get the job that got fifty percent of the surplus of the kingdom. The struggle was frequently quite bloody, with entire branches of the royal family being killed off by the victorious prince to forestall threats to the throne. The second problem was that the king's share was out of all proportion to what he provided in exchange. Consequently there was constant pressure to reduce the king's share and increase that of the nobility. As Wales points out, "every conceivable species of corruption was in vogue amongst the army of officials who handled the king's revenues at one stage or another, with a result that only a comparatively small proportion of the amount collected became available for legitimate government expenditure." (Wales misses the point here: "legitimate" meant being spent on the king's pleasure; "corrupt" meant being spent on the pleasure of the nobility; Wales probably also understates the amount that got to the king, though there is no doubt that some great part got lost along the way: that was the point of collecting the gross amount in the first place.) In any event, these two problems at the top are in marked contrast to the stability of the system at the bottom, i.e. in the exchange system between the phrai and that on the one hand and the nobility on the other. Why this was so is not clear to me yet, and it deserves further study; it may be related either to the structure somehow, or it may simply be a consequence of the small numbers needed to overthrow and/or "cheat" the king.

Thus far (leaving aside the religious sphere) this system shows a major difference from the one proposed in JEF-6: it does not have the differentiation in the extractive system between the tax collectors and the enforcers, which in my earlier approximation would have left open the possibility of bargaining by elements within the extractive system, one with the other. The Thai system was peculiar in that the nobility was not organized into specialized hierarchies; there was only one structure, headed by the king. To rule progressively larger areas the system grew like a tapeworm: it developed more and more identical segments, each responsible for a variety of functions, tax collection, defense, justice, within its own area. I am not clear on the implications of this, except that I think it tended to improve the position of the king. As we will see shortly, this same lack of differentiation also applied to the religious sphere, where it assuredly enhanced the position of the king, in contrast for example with the situation in Europe in a comparable era.

Nevertheless it was autonomy that made this system work, as we learned in JEF-6; that is, it was the immunity of the king and the nobility from any forces that the phrai and the that could bring to bear that permitted them to go on taking the surplus from those at the bottom. We saw that when the size of the surplus grew, it permitted someone to hire a staff to protect him, while paying the staff with the resources extracted from those he was protected against. Curiously, the ideology of such systems always asserts (as in the Thai case) that it is the people whose surplus is taken that are receiving the protection; in fact, "protection system" may be the best description of the operation of the system. In the modern variant, a band of people will join together to threaten violence to others if support is not forthcoming. The basic similarity is of course that the ancient Thai system had exactly the same end in mind, and used the same means: it was designed so that if support was not forthcoming for the king from those at the bottom, their ruin was assured through the agency of the king's nobles themselves. The ingeniousness of the ancient Thai system lay in the fact, however, that whereas modern protection systems operate contrary to the law, within a larger legal framework, the ancient Thai protection system was the law. Everyone, king, noble and freeman, had labor power to exchange, but only nobles and the king had "protection" to offer, hence laying the basis of exchange; and they got this "protection" capability from their special status within the law, made of course by themselves. The ancient Thai system was also an improvement on the modern one in that it ensured that the people at the bottom had no bargaining power at all; hence it was able to extract all the surplus, or almost all. We will discuss shortly the special control mechanisms adopted for this purpose.

I admit that this may not do full justice to the operation of the modern legal system, for the data clearly indicate that modern legal structures define a system of rules resulting in upward wealth transfers only somewhat less stringent than that of ancient Thailand. But to get a handle on this we must first unravel the meaning of "surplus" in a complex, monetized economy.

[The next installment will continue this discussion by considering: the king's perception of the system; the position of the Buddhist Church; control mechanisms for both elites and masses; why the system persisted; and how the system changed and why.]